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ABSTRACT

This study was undertaken to assess the impact of children's behaviors on employed parents' adjustment and to test a specific model of how spouse support may facilitate coping with the stress of a difficult child. It was hypothesized that child behavioral difficulty and spouse support would affect maternal depression through the mediation of perceived satisfaction in home and work roles. Subjects were participants (N=135) in an ongoing panel study of 200 women, each employed full-time in either college teaching or middle level management. All women were married and had at least one preschool-aged child. Data were collected from women at four time points and from their husbands at two points over a 12-month period. Multiple standardized instruments were used to measure perceptions of child behavior, spouse support, and depression. Preliminary results of a path analysis indicated that child behavioral difficulty was related to parental depression through the mediation of parental role satisfaction. General support from one's spouse appeared to exert its protective influence against depression indirectly through the mediation of work role satisfaction. (Author/NB)

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Employed Parents' Depression:
Effects of Spouse Support
and Child Behavior

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Abstract

Early research on maternal employment focused on effects on the family, and particularly the children. Focus shifted in the 1970s to effects on the woman herself, with studies of multiple roles and role conflict. The present study is part of a growing body of research that seeks to further research in this area by examining contextual aspects of roles and the mechanisms by which spouse support and child characteristics affect both mothers' and fathers' well being and mental health. For purposes of this study, the particular aspects of roles examined were general spouse support and child behavior, both linked to parental mental health in the research, although to date not examined simultaneously relative to employment issues. The purpose of the current study was to assess the impact of children's behaviors on employed parents' adjustment and to test a specific model of how spouse support may facilitate coping with the stress of a difficult child. We hypothesized that child behavioral difficulty and spouse support would affect maternal depression through the mediation of perceived satisfaction in home and work roles.

This paper is based on an ongoing panel study of 200 women, each employed full time in either college teaching or middle level management. All women were married and had at least one preschool aged child. Data were collected from women at four time points and from their husbands at two points over a 12 month period. Multiple standardized instruments were used to measure perceptions of child behavior (Abidin, 1983; Conners, 1970); spouse support (Abbey, et al., 1985); and depression (Derogatis, 1977).

Preliminary results of a path analysis indicate that child behavioral difficulty is related to parental depression through the mediation of parental role satisfaction. General support from one's spouse appeared to exert its protective influence against depression indirectly through the mediation of work role satisfaction. These findings will be discussed in relation to current theory and research on temperament, social support, and maternal employment.

Employed Parents' Depression: Effects of Spouse Support and Child Behavior

Early research on maternal employment focused on effects on the family (Moen, 1982), and most particularly effects on children (Hoffman, 1977; Lamb, 1979; Bronfenbrenner, & Crouter, 1982). Focus has more recently shifted to effects on the woman herself, with studies of multiple roles and role conflict (Gilbert, Holahan, & Manning, 1981; and Bianchi, & Spain, 1986). The present study is part of a growing body of research that seeks to further refine our knowledge of maternal employment by examining contextual aspects of roles, as well as mechanisms by which these contextual variables affect both fathers' and mothers' mental health and well being (Easterbrooks, & Goldberg, 1985).

For purposes of this study, the particular contextual aspects of roles examined were general spouse support and child behavior, both linked with maternal mental health in the research (Cutrona, & Troutman, 1986; Crockenberg, 1981), although to date not simultaneously examined relative to employment issues or to fathers' mental health. Role satisfaction in work and parenting roles were additional contextual variables examined having been linked in the literature with depressive symptoms (Krause, & Geyer-Pestello, 1985).

The purpose of the current study was to assess the impact of child behavior on employed mothers' and fathers' adjustment and to test a specific model of how spouse support may facilitate coping with the stress of a difficult child. We hypothesized that child difficulty and spouse support would affect parental depression through the mediation of perceived satisfaction in home and work roles.

This paper is based on an ongoing panel study of 200 women, each employed full time in either college teaching or middle level management. All women were married and had at least one preschool aged child. Data were collected from women at four

time points and from their spouses at two points over a 12 month period. This approach contributes to research in the area by: 1) providing parallel data from both spouses, enabling comparison across mother/father responses; 2) an examination of the effect of a child's behavior on his or her employed parents; and 3) enlarging the scope of the model to include mental health outcomes for both mothers and fathers.

A factor that has received very little attention in the literature on employed mothers and dual earner couples is the temperament and behaviors of the child(ren). Marked individual differences have been documented among children's behavior in the preschool period (Brazelton, 1961; Thomas, & Chess, 1977; Kagan, 1984). Difficult children exhibit intense emotional reactions, cry easily and often, and are difficult to comfort when upset. They are slow to accept new people or routines, and their biological functions are irregular and unpredictable. Clinical observations have suggested that mothers of such difficult children feel inadequate and depressed (Brazelton, 1961), but no systematic research has been conducted on the effect of such children on employed parents, both mothers and fathers. In such families, it would seem that an easy, adaptable child would facilitate parental coping and adaptation to the morass of childcare arrangements, work schedules, and home tasks. In a "too much to do, too little time" framework, a difficult child (we would predict) would introduce further stressors and conflicts, and decrease coping effectiveness and adjustment.

Intra-role stress and conflict are differentially experienced by men and women (Verbrugge, 1988; Ulbrich, 1988). Responses to home and work roles are conditional on the importance of work conditions. The fact that wives have greater home responsibilities than husbands makes childcare and its related stressors particularly salient for women's psychological functioning (Schooler, et al., 1984). The design of the current study by examining both husbands' and wives' depression, as well as childcare interactions and child behaviors, will enable

testing of the hypothesis: that women's psychological functioning would be more affected by a behaviorally difficult child.

One resource that has helped mothers of difficult children is social support. Mothers with irritable babies who had high levels of social support were able to establish more secure attachments with their infants than women with low levels of support (Crockenberg, 1981). Little is known, though, of the mechanisms through which social support helps women cope (Wortman, 1984; House, et al., 1988). The current study was designed to examine the impact of children's difficult behavior on both mothers' and fathers' adjustment, and to test a specific model of how social support may facilitate coping with the stress caused by a difficult child.

Methods

Subjects

The respondents were 135 women professionals with preschool age children and their husbands. The women were selected from two broadly-defined occupational fields: university professor and business woman. All respondents were identified through their employers. To be eligible for the study, a woman had to be working at least 30 hours per week, be married and currently living with her husband, and have at least one child between the ages of one and five years old.

University professors were identified from lists of instructional faculty provided by the four largest universities in Michigan and the two largest universities in the Chicago area. Every university contacted agreed to participate. All of the universities except one, were state institutions. Telephone screening interviews were conducted to determine the eligibility of each female on each list. Using this method, a total of 116 eligible female university professors was identified, of which 108 (93%) agreed to participate.

Business women were selected from companies in geographic proximity to the universities. The target population included

all companies with 50 or more employees located within a five-county area in Michigan or in Cook County in Illinois, and having one of four Standard Industrial Classification (SIC) codes. The SIC codes corresponded to four industries which tend to attract female profession-level employees in banking, accounting, law, and advertising. The sampling frame was stratified by size into small, medium, and large companies, and companies were randomly selected from within these strata to obtain an even distribution of participants across the four types of companies. A total of 104 companies was contacted, 72 in Michigan and 32 in Cook County. Sixty-eight of the Michigan companies (94%) and 26 of the Chicago-area companies (81%) agreed to participate.

The following analyses are based on a subset of cases for whom data are available from both the woman professional and her husband. This subsample includes 67 university professors and 68 business women. When compared to the subset of cases whose husbands did not participate, the only demographic variable that differentiated the two groups was job tenure. Women whose husbands refused to participate in the study had been in their current jobs significantly longer ($M = 5.4$ years) than women whose husbands agreed to participate ($M = 4.2$ years), $t(198) = -2.54$, $p < .05$.

Procedure

The findings presented in this paper are based on the first of four waves of data collected over a year's period. At the first time point, each woman was interviewed in person by a trained interviewer. The interview was conducted either in the woman's home or office, depending on her preference. These interviews averaged two hours in length. Prior to the interview, each respondent received a questionnaire to be completed and returned to the interviewer at the time of the interview. Along with the pre-interview questionnaire, each respondent also received a spouse questionnaire for her husband to complete. The spouse questionnaire contained instructions for the husband to complete the questionnaire on his own and mail it directly back to the study investigators.

Sample Description

Ninety-one percent of the women in this sample were white; three percent were black, and the remaining seven percent were of other races. The mean ages of the women and their husbands were 35.0 years and 37.2 years, respectively. These couples had been married an average of 8.0 years. Fifty-six percent of the couples had one child, 33% had two children, 10% had three children, and one percent had four children. The children ranged in age from 13 months to 21 years old. The median age of the children in single-child families was 2.5 years old; in families with two children, the median age was 4.9 years; and in families with three or more children, the median age was 10.5 years. Eighty-four percent of the women and 77% of their husbands had college degrees. Seventy-eight percent of the women and 68% of their husbands also had graduate degrees. Fifty-eight percent of the husbands were employed in professional and technical occupations, 23% were managers, 13% were sales workers, and the remaining six percent were clerical workers, craftsmen, operatives, and service workers. The median total family income, reported by both members of the couple, was in the category \$70,000 to \$74,999. The median income the women reported for themselves was in the category \$30,000 to \$34,999. The median income reported by their husbands was in the category \$35,000 to \$39,999.

Comparisons between the university professors and business women showed that the professors were significantly older ($M = 37.5$ years) than the business women ($M = 32.6$ years), $t(133) = 7.55$, $p < .01$. Professors had also been in their present jobs significantly longer ($M = 5.0$ versus 3.5 years), $t(132) = 2.90$, $p < .01$, and had been married significantly longer ($M = 9.1$ versus 7.0 years), $t(133) = 3.22$, $p < .01$. Additionally, a significantly greater proportion of the professors had college degrees (100% versus 70.6%, $\chi^2(1, N = 129) = 21.23$, $p < .0001$), and graduate degrees (98.5% versus 27.0%, $\chi^2(1, N = 114) = 38.16$, $p < .0001$). Although personal and spouse incomes

were not significantly different for these two groups of women, the mean total family income of the university professors ($M = \$85,000$ to $\$89,999$) was significantly higher than that of the business women ($M = \$70,000$ to $\$74,999$), $t(131) = 2.23$, $p < .05$.

Measures

Each measure for this study was assessed for both husbands and wives.

Depression. Depression was measured using the 13-item depression subscale of the SCL-90 (Derogatis, 1977) which has been shown to have high construct validity and reliability. The coefficient alpha for our sample was .85. Higher scores indicate more depression. Norms for our sample were not significantly different from those of a non-help seeking adult sample (Derogatis, 1977).

Dimensions of job and parental role satisfaction were measured with parallel six-item scales based on Pearlin and Schooler's (1978) measures of role strains and satisfactions. The six-item scale (three strains and three satisfactions) for each domain (work and parenting) was based on response options of 1, "never or almost never" to 5, "always or almost always." Respondents were asked to rate how often they had felt happy, satisfied, frustrated or angry, insecure, and unhappy in each particular role, and how often they enjoyed themselves in each role during the previous month. The alpha coefficient in the present study was .81 for both job and parenting satisfaction.

Child Behavior Measures. Items from the Abbreviated Parent Questionnaire, developed by Conners (1970) and the Parenting Stress Index (PSI) developed by Abidin (1983) were included to represent parental perceptions of their children. The Conners items indicate the degree to which the mother and father see the child as restless or overactive and easily frustrated and represent the temperament construct of mood. Conners (1970) has found that these parental judgments are relatively unaffected by the age, race, or social status of the child being rated, and

that they correlate with parental suspicions that a child may be disturbed. An alpha coefficient of .77 was obtained for this index. The Parenting Stress Index (Abidin, 1983) items were included as another construct of temperament, adaptability. A four-point scale was used (1 = "very much," 4 = "not at all present") to measure the extent to which the respondents saw hard to calm and upset behaviors in their children. There were no significant differences in maternal and paternal child behavior perceptions, reenforcing the validity of parental judgments. For analyses, the scores were reversed and summed for the items, so that higher scores reflected more difficult behavior levels.

Since approximately 88% of the sample had 1-2 children, the scores of the first two children were analyzed and split at the means for each to form easy and difficult behavior groups. For some of the analyses the easy/difficult groups for each child were joined in the four possible permutations: easy/easy; difficult/easy; easy/difficult; and difficult/difficult. The alpha coefficient was .63 for this sample.

Spouse Support. Spouse support was assessed for both husbands and wives using measures developed by Abbey, Abrahamis, and Caplan (1985) in their study of social support and well being. Two dimensions of social support were assessed: social support and social conflict. Abbey, et al. (1985), use Kahn and Antonucci's (1980) definition of social support as composed of affect, affirmation, and aid. Social conflict, in contrast, suggests expressions of negative affect and disconfirmation. The eight-item scale was based on response options of 1, "not at all" to 5, "a great deal." Respondents were asked to rate how often their spouse gave useful advice, encouragement/reassurance, listened, and acted in appreciative ways, as well as how often their spouse misunderstood things, criticized unjustly, got on their nerves and made too many demands. Negative items were reverse scored, and all items were then summed for each spouse, higher scores indicating greater support. For some analyses support was divided into high, medium, and low categories. Coefficient alphas were .74 for women and .64 for men.

Interaction with Children. Eight items adapted from Hill and Stafford (1980) assessed parent participation in specific childcare activities and mothers' and fathers' perceptions of their proportionate level of participation on a five-point scale of 1, "wife much more than husband," to 5, "husband much more than wife." The center point, 3, was "both about the same." Criteria for inclusion in the resultant scale were items on which parental assessment of childcare activity participation was not significantly different. Using these criteria, five items were included: physical care, teaching skills, playing for fun, staying home with a sick child, and driving children to activities. Mothers and fathers scores were summed with higher scores indicating greater father involvement. Coefficient alpha was .63 for husbands and .93 for wives.

Results

Descriptive Statistics

Self reported ratings of depression for our sample of 138 women and their spouses were not significantly different from those of a non-help seeking adult sample. In addition, depression scores were unrelated to income, age, job tenure, years married, education, and number of children. The mean item score for women was 1.93 and for men 1.64, which meant women were slightly more depressed (between "not at all" and "a little bit"), when endorsing items such as "feeling no interest in things" to "feeling hopeless about the future." Recall the range of options was 1, "not at all" to 5, "extremely."

The mean on the proportionate childcare activity participation scale indicated that on the 5 childcare activities assessed, wives generally were doing more than their husbands. On two of the activities, however, the majority of husbands and wives reported tasks were shared equally: teaching children skills about the world and playing interactively with the children.

Recall that parent reported ratings of child behavior were not significantly different. The possible range for the

four-item scale was 4-16, with four indicating an extremely "easy" child and 16 a difficult one. No reported norms exist, since the scale was a compilation of Abidin (1983) and Conners(1970) items, but the mean score for four items for the youngest child was 8.1374 (S.D. = 2.3980) and for the second child was 7.6032 (S.D. = 2.0521). This means behavior such as restlessness and being hard to calm was generally perceived as "just a little" present, and the second child was generally perceived as slightly easier.

Spouse support had a per item mean between "some" and "quite a bit supportive" (3-4). Only "a great deal" (5) would have indicated greater support. (Six of the men and three of the women gave spouses this highest rating on each item.)

Although no reported norms exist for summed Pearlin scale items of job and parenting satisfaction, the highest mean was reported for parenting satisfaction ($\bar{X} = 24.78$), which was significantly higher than the job satisfaction mean ($\bar{X} = 21.87$). Ranges for the six-item scale were from 6-30 (1, "never or almost never" to 5, "always or almost always"). The summed means indicated that for parenting, on the average, parents rated they felt happy and satisfied "often" (4); while for their jobs their rating was on the average nearer to "sometimes" (3).

Path Analyses

The hypothesis that contextual aspects of the home role, e.g., children's behavior and spouse support would be related to depression was initially tested by Pearson product-moment correlations (correlation matrices) and one way analysis of variance analyses (ANOVAs). The behavior scores of the first two children were split at the mean for each to form easy and difficult behavior groups, and then the four possible permeations (easy/easy; difficult/easy; etc.), were examined for a relationship with fathers' and mothers' depression scores using a one way analysis of variance (ANOVA). Children's behavior did account for differences in depression for fathers ($F(3,43) = 2.9825, p < .05$); but not mothers ($F(3,42) = 1.0526, p > .05$).

Since role satisfaction (job and parenting) for both mothers and fathers was significantly related to depression (inverse relationship), path analyses were conducted with the use of multiple regression techniques using those variables. Figure 1 represents the results of the path analyses.

In this study, children's behavior had a large effect on both mothers' and fathers' depression, accounting for 21-27% of the variance. More difficult children contributed to less parental role satisfaction, which in turn led to increased depression for both mothers and fathers.

In both men and women, however, support from one's spouse appeared to exert its protective function against depression primarily through the mediation of role satisfaction in work roles.

There were a few differences, however. Children's behavior influenced spouse support provided to mothers, but didn't have the same effect on dads. That is, as children got harder to manage for mothers, spouse support in general decreased. The behavior of children did not seem to effect as much the general spouse support given to husbands by their wives.

An additional difference was found in men and women when the interaction with children variable was entered into preliminary analyses. Recall that this variable represented the proportion of husband/wife time spent on several childcare activities. As fathers' participation with children increased, mothers' parenting satisfaction decreased, a finding which supports recently published research by Baruch, & Barnett (1986).

Discussion

The results of the preliminary path analyses support the theoretical assumptions that children's behavior (difficult) can be a stressor that has the potential to disrupt parental functioning. Those parents, both mothers and fathers, who experienced difficult children were more likely to view their parental role with less satisfaction, which was associated with increased depression. And although mothers' and fathers' work

satisfaction and subsequent lowered depression were associated with spouse support, it was the mothers who perceived most acutely the loss of spouse support when children were difficult.

Although the hypothesis that children's behavior can affect parental functioning was supported, a word of caution is in order. First, it is impossible to determine direction of causality with cross sectional analyses such as these. Depression may influence perceptions of children's behavior, just as children's behavior may influence parental depression. Although we attempted to strengthen parental self report by using both parents' assessments of their children, more depressed parents may be more apt to perceive a child as behaviorally difficult. Longitudinal analyses, which our study data will provide, are needed to clarify directionality.

Additional analyses are needed as well to assess the interaction of spouse support and children's behavior. Judd and Kenny (1981) suggest the testing for such interaction between the antecedent variable (child behavior) and the mediating variable (spouse support) in path analyses. Such analyses are planned, entering a product term of children's behavior and spouse support as a predictor in the regression where depression is the criterion.

The implications of such gender based research are many. As men are finding the home as women discover the workplace, it behooves us to examine mental health effects of children's behavior for both fathers and mothers. Although the process may be slightly different, children and the structural/contextual variables of home and work are increasingly defining the psychological functioning of men as well as women.

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Figure 1. Path analysis of child behavior, spouse support and role satisfaction for depression in employed parents.

Child's Behavior → Depression

Child's Behavior → Parenting Role Satisfaction → Depression

